

ILANA GERSHON

Indiana University

[rh]Porous social orders

Volume 46 Issue 4 November 2019

[ti]Porous social orders

[ab]Many cultural anthropologists today share a common theoretical commitment: to view the people they encounter during fieldwork as living among multiple social orders that are interconnected and contingent. When social orders are multiple, ethnographers are quickly faced with the question of how people construct the boundaries between these social orders to be both durable (enough) to keep social orders distinct and porous (enough) to allow people, objects, forms, and ideas to circulate across them in appropriate ways. What counts as appropriate is, not surprisingly, often hotly contested. Despite contemporary ethnographers' varied intellectual trajectories, a crosscutting set of theoretical assumptions unites their work and shapes how they approach familiar anthropological foci, such as circulation, ritual, scale, and power. [*porous boundaries, social orders, circulation, ritual, scale, power, fieldwork, ethnography, theory*]

[dc]What Sherry Ortner wrote in 1984 about anthropology as a discipline can still resonate on bad days: "The field appears to be a thing of shreds and patches, of individuals and small coterie pursuing disjunctive investigations

and talking mainly to themselves” (Ortner 1984, 126). Yet she productively tracked a set of shared orientations toward practice, one that enabled ethnographers of seemingly disparate sites to enter into vibrant intellectual dialogues. Today, anthropologists are experiencing a similar moment. What looks like a diverse array of approaches in the discipline is in fact a coherent set of analytical responses to a real need, one generated by the perceived poverty of the analytical categories that anthropologists have inherited and by the concerns of people in anthropologists’ field sites. Instead of analyzing ethnographic materials through the lens of practice, with all that practice implies, many anthropologists these days are interrogating what happens when their fieldwork interlocutors live among multiple social orders that are kept distinct yet have porous boundaries.<sup>1</sup>

Ethnographers of multiple social orders share common assumptions and questions that they arrive at in part because of the ethnographic practices they analyze. Their stated interventions are often oriented toward topical subfields and area studies, such as the anthropology of Christianity, medical anthropology, development studies, or the new Melanesian ethnography. There is a broad heterogeneity in the intellectual dialogues they engage with when arriving at this shared set of concerns, as well as a wide range of terms used to address similar practices. Yet they all engage with ethnographic conundrums produced by the simultaneous existence of differently patterned and often contradictory ways of ordering interactions

and relationships. That is, the approach waddles like a theoretical movement, but it doesn't quack like one.

Many contemporary ethnographers assume that people live among social orders that are multiple, contingent, and interconnected. In using "social orders," I refer to a moment in the late 1990s when critiques of terms such as *culture* and *society* were so prolific and warranted that some anthropologists turned to the phrase *social order* as less charged (Bercovitch 1994). Today, ethnographers use many different terms, including *regime of value* (Appadurai 1986), *epistemic culture* (Knorr-Cetina 1999), and *assemblage* (Ong and Collier 2005), that all reflect nuanced distinctions in the degree of structure or contingency in a particular context. Thus, part of anthropology's heterogeneous muddle may result from the diversity of these terms and the extensive range of what anthropologists engage with as patterned, varyingly structured, and transportable—whether legal systems, global health regimes, religions, or shared epistemologies. Focusing too much on the precise nature of social orders overlooks widespread commonalities in contemporary ethnographic analysis. In this article, I will use *social orders* as a broad umbrella term to refer to patterned, perduring, interwoven, and transportable repertoires of interactions that are available for reflexive explication.

Social orders are porous, sometimes by design and sometimes by accident. People who live among multiple social orders continually try to

create and maintain boundaries between them, boundaries that are leaky in the right ways, not in the wrong ways. For this reason, boundaries emerge as a lens for making visible the distinctions between social orders, for ethnographers and sometimes for those they study.<sup>2</sup> Often these are boundaries produced largely by practice and social analysis, but sometimes they are more concrete. Ethnographers of multiple social orders will focus on translation (Gal 2015) or circulation (Tsing 2005) as moments when crossing between social orders is likely to inspire the social analysis in which their interlocutors engage during fieldwork. They also analyze how people create standardized forms that are putatively acontextual (Star and Lampland 2009), since appearing to cross social orders seamlessly is as much a challenge as distinguishing between them.

Porous boundaries let people, ideas, objects, and forms circulate between social orders in ways that often keep distinctions between social orders durable. What is an appropriately porous boundary, or appropriate distinction, is often contested, determined by power and perspective. In general, contemporary ethnographers focus on how people move between multiple social orders and on how they move objects, forms, and ideas across boundaries using consciously calibrated strategies.

The following examples may seem all over the map, but this is evidence for my argument, not a refutation of it. The widespread focus on social orders and their porous boundaries has emerged because many

anthropologists share a common set of ethnographically derived concerns and similar enough theoretical assumptions. As a consequence, they have encountered shared conceptual quandaries, generating congruent directions to explore. The assumptions resonate with a range of theoretical movements; this theoretical analytic is not distinct because it comprises entirely novel theoretical stances. Some moves will resemble actor-network theory, while other aspects of it will be compatible with the work of certain theorists, such as Bakhtin, Garfinkel, Massey, and Strathern. In addition, there is a long tradition in social theory in which ethnographers grapple with multiple social orders in many fields—readers see this in ethnographies of legal pluralism, postcolonialism, Christianity, human ecology, development, and so on. In particular, linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have long prefigured the tensions between heterogeneous and emergent patternings of social orders in their analyses of linguistic repertoires and of perduring communicative economies (Blommaert 2013; Silverstein 2004). Much of the research has been influenced by semiotic and scalar analyses, which hold that patterned forms of circulation always already entail their own kinds of differentiations and imaginations (Irvine and Gal 2000; Strathern 2004; Tsing 2005).

By asking what becomes relevant when emphasizing the multiplicity of social orders, ethnographers produce original analyses of familiar topics, such as circulation, ritual, scale, and power. Focusing on circulation and

scale spurs ethnographers to study when and how multiple social orders are maintained as simultaneously distinct and interconnected. By contrast, ritual and bounded performances in general let fieldwork interlocutors experiment with creating a separate social order, however temporarily. Lastly, ethnographers of multiple social orders interrogate how power is at stake when people maintain, impose, or dismantle social orders and distinguish one social order from another over space and time.

## [h1]Shared assumptions

[ni]When ethnographers assume that everyone lives among multiple social orders, they make four additional, theoretically significant assumptions. First, they assume that social orders are presupposed and entailed in interactional moments but do not exist as overarching structures external to those moments. In other words, people create and re-create social orders by using already existing conceptual and infrastructural repertoires in the interactional moment. One can be strategic and inventive, but within limits. Thus ethnographers who address these conceptual quandaries tend to have a strong ethnomethodological, performative, or Bakhtinian sensibility (Merlan 2005; Schram 2018).

A social order's durability is an achievement, often commonplace, but an achievement nonetheless. Through interactions, people call forth social orders and, in doing so, often labor to distinguish one social order from other

possible ones. When people navigate multiple social orders, they are also maintaining boundaries between social orders through their interactions; boundaries are not given or inherently durable.

The effort to create a durable social order is not always about ensuring the historical longevity of the social order. It can involve consciously trying to turn away from what everyone in that context sees as the predictable or culturally appropriate way to act, and instead seeking alternative and sustainable relationships. For example, in a female boarding house in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, women struggle to create a respectable and modern middle-class femininity that will permit them to reject a social order enacted through village customs and kinship ties, as described by Melissa Demian (2017).<sup>3</sup> The women aim to create a new social order almost whole cloth, one that results in companionate marriage and accumulated wealth, neither of which is possible under other social orders available to them. The performative act of creation is fragile, and the women must be vigilant in recognizing and avoiding moments when others will try to enmesh them in more historically grounded expectations. Even this example shows some crucial aspects about how social orders operate, demonstrating that these orders are emergent and vulnerable, as are the distinctions between them.

Second, ethnographers of multiple social orders make a concerted methodological and theoretical attempt to understand how people manage circulation across social orders, both purposefully and accidentally. In doing

so, ethnographers make visible the differences between social orders. They are not interested in mapping social orders but in tracking the circulation between them. This emphasis differs from that of previous social theorists who also viewed people, objects, forms, and ideas as existing among multiple social orders—be they Pierre Bourdieu's (1972) social fields, Niklas Luhmann's (1995) social systems, or many others. For earlier theorists, social orders were often subsumed by a larger closed system, frequently society writ large, so the question of circulation was less pressing. Contemporary ethnographers find laminations where earlier theorists presumed totalities.

In general, this contemporary focus on living *among* multiple social orders means that the internal dynamics of a social order are relevant for analysts largely when these dynamics shed light on the complications and consequences of how a social order coexists alongside many others. For example, a religiously defined social order can become difficult to interweave with a political one, as shown by Elina Hartikainen's (2018) analysis of the tensions that Afro-Brazilian religious activist groups encounter when they engage with liberal democratic practices. In 2009 the Brazilian government was keen to include religious groups in various forms of democratic deliberation. Activists were being incorporated into the Brazilian political sphere, encouraged by various government coalitions and the press as advocates of religious tolerance. Yet Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners felt

that democratic egalitarianism potentially undermined their hierarchical forms of social organization, which are integral to how they assert their authority and knowledge.

The contrast between the political and the religious shapes what it becomes important for the ethnographer to explain about Afro-Brazilian religions and Brazilian democracy. To understand the conundrum that the religious leaders face, one has to understand the social hierarchy that underpins all their interactions, as well as the ideal of active democratic citizenship that the Brazilian government proffered. Hartikainen thus explores the strategies that religious practitioners develop to maintain both possible forms of respect—the respect based on equality and the respect based on hierarchy—by carefully reasserting the boundaries of social orders at every turn. It is the contrast between these two orders that brings to the fore questions about how to maintain the respect inherent in hierarchy while opening a space for engaging with the egalitarianism promised in liberal democratic exchanges. In addition, interweaving or moving between these two social orders forces people on the ground to become explicit analysts of the contradictions in their situation as they try to develop practical and context-specific solutions.

Third, when turning to circulations or encounters, ethnographers often uncover layers of conflict around what might be the best way to move people, objects, forms, and ideas across the boundaries of social orders.

Ethnographers can see power in action by examining how people determine (or refuse to agree on) what makes for proper circulation. In encounters, people often try to figure out how to manage this circulation in and out of social orders and to do this successfully enough that, while everyone may not agree on what counts as proper practices, circulation still takes place in ways more or less acceptable for all involved.

This good enough circulation, however, often reinforces inequalities. For example, when US medical residents heed the call to participate in global health efforts and travel to hospitals in Botswana for short-term visits, they are often captivated by a particular narrative of social causality that Betsey Brada (2011) traces in their understanding of global health. This narrative entails heroically visiting resource-limited medical spaces where their expertise can bring speedy and visible changes in patients' health. In this moment, they have a strong sense of what it means to be a global health worker—traveling to many different countries and embodying a standardized medical knowledge that makes it possible for them to heal anywhere, regardless of local conditions or legislation. The putatively "local" doctors and nurses, who spend considerably more time at the hospitals than the visiting US doctors, often try to diminish the global health practitioners' heroic claims while nevertheless supporting their presence. They experience the global health narrative as undercutting their own expertise, since for US health workers to be properly heroic, local medical conditions and medical

practices have to be constructed as grievously lacking. Here, people struggle over the legitimacy of the narrative that underpins global health, and thus what counts as the appropriate way to reflect on the boundaries between medical practices in Botswana and other parts of the world.

At the same time, who gets to be understood as crossing boundaries is a bit up for grabs in this ethnographic setting. Just as the “local” health practitioners often feel they have to defend their own expertise, they also feel pressure not to acknowledge their own global life trajectories, even though they have overseas training and often greater international experiences than the visiting doctors (Brada 2011, 300). Those in the hospital have to negotiate what counts as global and local, who gets to embody these categories, and what elements of medical practice should be interpreted as universal—all this to sustain a steady flow of welcome medical labor and supplies. Even when ethnographers of multiple social orders find relatively successful moments of circulation, they explore the inequalities that are reproduced through the compromises and infrastructures that enable circulation in the first place.

Fourth, the boundaries between social orders are not given, or a natural or logical by-product of how the social order itself functions, which is another difference between this work and that of earlier theorists, who also recognized the existence of a plethora of social orders. These are boundaries that are typically created in asserting a social order—to produce a sustained

pattern is also to sort what or whom does not belong. For example, in bureaucracies (Hetherington 2011; Hull 2012) and courts (Agrama 2012; Richland 2013), officials are quick to insist that visitors acknowledge the premises of bureaucratic or legal order by which they must operate within that institutional context. These assertions always acknowledge the possibility that people might act otherwise, that visitors might insist on operating according to other social logics—that is, these assertions are boundary-making claims that risk being undercut by other claims to valid alternative social orders. In addition, these boundaries are also always understood to be permeable, so that people, objects, forms, and ideas from elsewhere can enter and, hopefully, be transformed or translated appropriately (while the possibility always remains that this will not happen, that people will interact inappropriately or according to other logics).

## [\[h1\]The continuum between epistemological differences and timescapes](#)

[ni]Once anthropologists decided that *culture* and *society* were problematic as analytical concepts, authors began to populate the discipline with a new set of terms designed to make visible continuities, discontinuities, and, generally speaking, social change. There was, after all, still a pressing need to understand how people encode information in ways similar enough to accomplish three things: communicate effectively with others (but not everyone; Douglas 1986, 47); determine what is available for moral debate

within a group; and know when and how people share understandings about what constitutes sameness and difference (Douglas 1986, 55). In continuing to deal with a version of social order, however named, anthropologists began to focus on different aspects of continuity and change, and they have thus been developing two different but complementary approaches to viewing a social order: as a shared way to understand social relations and as a shared way to organize social relations across time and space. In other words, some ethnographers emphasize the epistemological or organizational aspects of the social orders that their fieldwork interlocutors live among, while others emphasize their temporal or spatial aspects.<sup>4</sup>

When ethnographers discuss social orders through a lens tempered by a nostalgic connection to what the culture concept used to provide, they are attending simultaneously to both epistemological difference and social organization. In these moments, scholars may coin terms like the *postcultural* (Schram 2018) or *intercultural* (Merlan 2005) to signal their interlocutors' varied labors of organizing and classifying. For many scholars, how social orders function along these lines becomes known by analyzing how epistemological differences—such as different understandings of sociality and selfhood—combine with the ways that people practice social organization.

Yet not all ethnographers use this analytic to express an ambivalent longing for the theoretical work that the culture concept, however

problematic, used to accomplish for them. Some scholars are instead analyzing time and space to understand how people's experiences are partially structured by social orders, which are ever jostling with other social orders that offer different assemblages of timescapes and locations. Analyzing time encourages scholars to think about how different ways of accounting for time are placed in hierarchical relationships to one another, or how people and infrastructures are not always successfully trying to coordinate "divergent social rhythms" (Bear 2014, 17). Although time and space are always understood as intertwined, those who give greater attention to space might view it as the product of divergent and "distinctive forms of activity, thought, feeling and social or political relating" (Stasch 2017, 443), which then requires labor to bring these forms into relationship with each other.

There is an intellectual puzzle with which scholars of epistemological differences are more likely to engage than those who emphasize time and space, namely how different instantiations of social orders provide ways for people to explore fundamental cultural assumptions about sociality and selves, assumptions that are often in tension with each other. This is a puzzle that has been known for a long time. For example, in the 19th and early 20th century, Crow social organization shifted seasonally so that they could explore a culturally specific version of a tension between autonomy and social coordination (Lowie 1935). Crow Indians had fairly egalitarian

forms of decision-making in the winter months and highly disciplining police during the summer months, when they hunted buffalo—both forms of social organization more starkly evinced some ways of interacting that are always present in Crow understandings of how social relations function. Recently, many ethnographers have been seeing such tensions as traces of how people accommodate social orders introduced through colonialism, missionizing, and development projects.

When an ethnographer encounters multiple social orders, and one order has been introduced in recent memory, the ethnographer often questions how and when the relatively new social order is interwoven with the other frames available for ordering relationships. For instance, mourning is a moment when Auhelawa Massim people in Papua New Guinea explore what social relationships are encouraged by Christianity as opposed to *kastom*, which “is a way in which people talk about the institutions, rules, and values of a local village community with respect to its difference from foreign ideas and values introduced since the colonial period” (Schram 2018, 223). Christianity is not external to their logic—by the time Ryan Schram (2018) was doing fieldwork in the mid-2000s, Christianity was so thoroughly intermeshed with other ways of being Auhelawa that the Christian path was always an option. As a group, they view themselves as consciously choosing between Christianity and *kastom* in how they organize their funerals, although the actual practices of mourning may be more of a mixture than

participants openly acknowledge (Schram 2018, 175). Part of what gives mourning rituals meaning is this element of choice—to either highlight a collective historical past through a kastom burial or to express an orientation to individuation and a different set of exchange relations through a Christian burial.

Christianity and kastom are distinct types of ritual order in which Auhelawa explore alternative forms of social order and alternative ways of being social. In juxtaposing exchange and sharing as choices in planning ritual feasts, Auhelawa people imagine themselves as alternately kin or congregation, and the person as dividual or individual. Within the kastom social order, people explore being dividuals—nodes of social relationships, some of which are foregrounded in any exchange—while under the Christian one, people “imagine themselves as individuals” (Schram 2018, 182). While dividual and individual persons are co-constitutive, they are not equivalent. Auhelawa face a problem when choosing the Christian path because so much of mourning like a Christian is defined as not kastom, as “the negation of their being kin,” so in practice it is difficult to show that one is in fact mourning appropriately. This is an intriguing problem for people on the ground, a problem that can arise when people try to create the correct distinction between social orders—how does one know that one has established the distinction effectively enough to be meaningful, productive, and intelligible?

The nature of the distinction between social orders has led to a debate in the anthropology of Christianity that easily spills out into other arenas when multiple social orders are at stake—should scholars view a new juxtaposition of social orders as one of hybridity or oscillation (Vilaça 2016)? In a situation in which multiple social orders comprise a hybrid situation, the orders may be kept separate by people on the ground, the boundaries clearly demarcating distinct forms of selfhood and sociality—a take on social orders that Aparecida Vilaça ascribes to Joel Robbins (2015), among others. Oscillation, by contrast, exists only in a context of “systematic interconnections” (Vilaça 2016, 13) in which people consciously interweave the forms of moral orders available to them, alternating between which one is foregrounded in a context that is often spatially defined. As a discussion of Christianity, this easily becomes a question of what kind of cultural transformation is generated by large-scale conversion. But transposed to an issue of social orders in general, the question of the relationships between social orders—encompassing, distinct, or alternating—turns into a question about the nature of the boundaries between social orders. When it is a general question of how boundaries are used to make distinctions, this is a question best answered ethnographically, case by case.

Using the language of boundaries, however, could lead analysts to misrepresent people’s experiences of moving between different social orders. Sometimes the social orders exist simultaneously for people, and the social

labor involves making one social order dominate while others recind into the background.<sup>5</sup> This occurred often in my own research on Samoan diasporic ritual exchanges in the late 1990s, as Samoan families exchanged money, cloth, fine mats, and food during a wedding or funeral in a church built soon after Samoan families began to migrate to New Zealand or the United States in the 1950s (Gershon 2012). In the church hall, for example, there would be a soda vending machine that might be the source of the soda can that would substitute for a coconut during the ritual exchange. The traces of capitalist exchanges and colonial historical trajectories were present throughout the ceremony in the clothes people wore, the vehicles they used to get to the church, the food they served, and the objects (aside from fine mats) they exchanged. While some of these traces were very much on participants' minds—such as the dollar bills that were part and parcel of the exchange—this was still very much a Samoan ritual.

What people said, how they interacted, how they interpreted the exchanges, and what they ignored during these exchanges all called forth a Samoan social order. Hybridity was not the goal. In a given context, there may be indices of other cultural contexts, times, and places, but the social task at hand is to ensure that those participating are oriented toward letting one specific social order dominate. Other ways of interacting most likely have contributed to forming the moment at hand, but do not define it.

Scholars who emphasize time and space might explore different conundrums involving how people navigate multiple social orders, largely having to do with how the nature of time and space enables spatiotemporal orders to overlap or clash. One common thread that scholars explore is how people manage to be in one location with multiple spatial orderings. By focusing on spatial multiplicity, analysts can turn to how the as-if and the otherwise also affect interactions, for example when illegal migrants engage in daily activities as if they were legally in the United States, yet always conscious of performing legitimacy (Yngvesson and Coutin, forthcoming). There is more of an emphasis in these ethnographic accounts on how social orders let people not only repeat previous practices but also reimagine them. As Keith Basso (1996, 6) puts it, "Building and sharing place worlds . . . is not only a means of reviving former times but also of *revising* them, a means of exploring not merely how things might have been but also how, just possibly they might have been different from what others have supposed."

In these instances, multiplicity functions as potentiality. People on the Greek-Albanian border engage with multiple logics that define the spaces they dwell in, as Sarah Green (forthcoming) demonstrates. The residual layers of the Ottoman Empire's spatial ordering shape how they understand moving through that landscape as much as the recent national borders do. At any moment, those living on this border might see the land as part of

their families' long history with the places, as belonging to two distinct nation-states, and as the remnants of the Ottoman Empire, whose relationships to territory were so different from those of the modern nation-state. In a given context, the question people living on this border face is which form of ordering will dominate: Who will have the power to make one location, or a specific configuration of locations, determine how social interactions unfold in a given moment? For many who oppose nation-state representatives, multiplicity is the goal. Thus resistance might involve maintaining alternative spatial orderings for as long as possible.

Many contemporary efforts to define a spatial or temporal frame for others are justified by calls for standardization, and thus a dominant theme for analysts has become how standardization occurs and spreads (Star and Lampland 2009). For example, Nepali development projects function in part by producing a generic notion of the Nepali village, as Stacy Pigg (1992) argues. While most of Nepal is rural, the village as a portable spatial form did not exist until various development projects began to mobilize it as a concept through policies, media outlets, and educational material.

The Nepali village was an especially useful construct for development discourse, since it posited a site where progress could take place, as well as a site where national identity could be imagined. To formulate policy, development projects required a standardized village and a generic villager, even though people's actual experiences of village life were quite varied and

villages themselves were formed from complex historical trajectories (Pigg 1992, 504–5). In short, development workers required a standardized relationship to a generic place populated by typifiable people in order to fashion what they considered the proper teleological orientation to a modernizing future. Development workers found standardization good to think with as a way to lay the groundwork for creating the social changes they were committed to. Here and elsewhere, standardization is an attempt to undercut the potential *as-ifs* inherent in coexisting multiple spatial orders while trying to create a more homogenized future.

## [h1]Everyone is a social analyst

[ni]While contemporary ethnographers may disagree about what precisely constitutes a social order, there is a general commitment to engaging with one's interlocutors in the field as social analysts in their own right, interlocutors whose reflexive social analysis is integral to how they both enact and traverse social orders. Unlike many previous theorists of culture or society, contemporary ethnographers take reflexivity to be crucial as people manage (and mismanage) boundaries. Thus reflexivity, however named, is also a shared analytical focus when ethnographers interrogate how porous social orders are constituted. Ethnographers of multiple social orders level the playing field between their interlocutors and themselves, thus responding to critiques of previous claims to ethnographic authority and

current critiques of ontological perspectivism (Bessire and Bond 2014; Killick 2014). By definition, fieldwork demands that ethnographers engage with multiple cultural repertoires simultaneously. Yet in depicting their interlocutors as having a culture or, more recently, an ontology, anthropologists often render invisible the indications that their interlocutors are as versatile as they are at switching frames of reference. The question of how people engage with radically different assumptions at the same time would and still does haunt fieldwork. Yet this question can vanish when anthropologists write about their fieldwork and describe their own versatility while overlooking their interlocutors' (Bowman 1997; Sperber 1985, 62–63).

Increasingly, ethnographers reject their privileged authorial position—people on the ground are social analysts in their own right, and their perspective on multiple social orders and their techniques for traversing them should be valued. How fieldwork interlocutors classify and understand different social orders is crucial for how social relationships in given circumstances will unfold. While the classification may be crucial, it is not determinative. When one is doing social analysis on the fly, so to speak, how one understands a situation might shape one's actions and reactions, but it does not define how the situation will unfold. Ethnographers may be able to understand how people classify these contrasting social orders and the differences produced by them, but such understanding is insufficient for predicting what anyone is likely to do.

Focusing on interlocutors' social analysis provides a certain vantage point for analyzing the often strenuous work people perform to keep the social orders distinct. Yet this work does not take place from an external point of reflection outside a social order. Social orders are partly distinguished by many people's epistemological assumptions, social organization, and strategies, which are specific to that particular social order. When viewed in terms of interlocutors' social analysis, this means that the analysis, and the reflexive awareness inherent to it, is in dialogue with how the social orders structure knowledge (Gershon 2006).

The discrepancies between fieldwork interlocutors' social analysis and the ethnographer's analysis can be productive, showing that, while reflexivity is a general mode of being social, it is not necessarily experienced in the same way across social orders. One of the ways that people engage with and move across multiple social orders is through strategic forgetting or not knowing, sometimes overlooking the people or objects that are traversing orders. Ethnographers will trace when and how people or objects are overlooked, using to analytical advantage the difference between their reflexive gaze and that of their fieldwork interlocutors.

For example, Nigerians of different religions either ignore or pay attention to particular sounds as they move through urban spaces. This allows Christians and Muslims to live together in a city that has become especially cacophonous thanks to loudspeakers proclaiming religious views

and openly demanding that others switch religions (Larkin 2014). City dwellers understand the noise emanating from loudspeakers as background noise that they agree to ignore, which Brian Larkin found more difficult to do during fieldwork. Yet those around him overlooked with ease any religious practitioner's attempts to convert them using a loudspeaker. Not all media that traverse social orders are treated with the same equanimity: when a Christian group switched medium and distributed religious pamphlets written in Arabic, violence broke out. Nigerians viewed both loudspeakers and pamphlets as broadcast media, but while they viewed loudspeakers as indiscriminately addressing everyone, they thought pamphlets should address only those who share the author's faith and should not be used to convert people. This example illustrates that not all circulation is noticed: loudspeakers can be ignored, but pamphlets in certain languages are not, being a media ideology that Larkin did not share and thus investigated. By using strategic inattention to the same forms of address, albeit in different media, different religious groups could coexist and treat the boundaries between the religious orders as not so permeable.

Alternatively, to maintain the boundaries, people sometimes must actively not know different aspects in different social orders. In Samoan ritual exchange, one must overlook all the learning that takes place before one can inhabit a role, yet when the same Samoan migrants engage in capitalist exchanges, they must ignore the labor that goes into producing

commodities (Gershon 2012). Role fetishism is one form of reflexive engagement, commodity fetishism another. While people's analyses of social orders are central to how these social orders are both fashioned and distinguished from each other, the reflexivity involved can be specific to that social order, which can be unpacked by comparing whether what is known or ignored, related or not related (Strathern 2018), remembered or forgotten, occurs differently across social orders.<sup>6</sup>

## [h1]Circulation

[ni]What kind of analysis emerges when ethnographers are interested in ethnographic moments when circulation is occurring across social orders that are constituted by how participants understand and enact these orders? Here, the dilemmas of coordination, translation, encounter, and standardization tend to take center stage. At the heart of these concerns is a series of questions. How does one translate objects, ideas, and subject positions from one type of social order to another (Gal 2015)? To what extent can meaning stay stable as objects and people travel through these orders, and what labor goes into maintaining stable meaning or translatable elements? How does coordination across social orders occur when the stability of meaning is radically up for grabs? What effects do efforts toward standardization have on circulation through multiple social orders?

Circulation always involves complex forms of coordination, encouraging people on the ground to engage explicitly with how value and meaning are attributed under different social orders. For example, when Minnesotan and Malagasy Lutherans organize the flow of humanitarian medical aid between the United States and Madagascar, they must also coordinate how objects travel across different ways of attributing value, as Britt Halvorson (2018) shows. The circulation of medical material transforms expired medical products or used equipment, which US insurance corporations consider medical waste, into useful supplies in Africa.

The situation offers a new twist on a concern that Arjun Appadurai (1986) raised in *The Social Life of Things*, namely how people coordinate the circulation of objects in and out of different regimes of value. People are not only coordinating different ways of ascribing use and exchange value to objects, but also viewing their exchange practices through ethical or sacred frameworks. The ethnographer's task is to understand

[ex]not only how capitalist, ethical, and sacred values coexist in the aid warehouses but also how, through situated moments of social recognition, they reverberate in people's labor activities, sometimes harmonizing together and other times creating discord through their differences. (Halvorson 2018, 103)

Much of the labor of ascribing different values to objects occurs through sorting, through different volunteers' classifications and reclassifications of medical waste into potentially useful supplies or junk (for an account of how value is produced as new actors sort anew previously classified objects, see Tsing 2013). As they classify, volunteers anticipate others' perspectives and practices, often those of people in Madagascar whom they will never meet. They are thus creating the boundaries between social orders through the practicalities of classification, which can create humanitarian aid out of risky products (so risky that they are uninsurable in the United States). Yet once these supplies reach Madagascar, a new way of determining value dominates, and the items are often not viewed as useful supplies but as desirable symbols of sustained global interactions. To achieve these complex transfers through multiple and occasionally conflicting value regimes, participants have to perform well-calibrated acts of simultaneous recognition and forgetting so that objects can move across social orders. In this case, in the United States, they must ignore the risk inherent in turning medical discards into aid. In Madagascar they must also ignore the loss of symbolic capital in being forced to accept another's waste, and they do this by focusing on the links to global commerce that the exchanges create.

Halvorson (2018) never uses the term *boundary object*, but in her multisited ethnography, medical waste in fact functions as such—as objects

that have interpretive flexibility, creating “a sort of arrangement that allow[s] different groups to work together without consensus” (Star 2010, 602). For some, personal objects that are no longer needed, such as eyeglasses that worked only for their younger self’s eyes, constitute medical waste. For others, they are an insurance risk or objects to be sorted for their potential usefulness in Africa, or signs of an enduring international relationship. Part of why eyeglasses can travel from Minnesota to Madagascar is precisely because they are boundary objects; there is enough commonality of practice and purpose that all the groups involved in circulating this form of humanitarian aid can “work together without consensus” (Star 2010, 602). Boundary objects become significant when scholars track objects as they move across boundaries in ways that can still be viewed as appropriate by groups who do not share a common perspective or who disagree on meanings and value.

Sometimes, those involved in circulating objects are less concerned with making sure that the objects circulate than with ensuring that their meaning stays stable as they circulate. Everyone involved in the Swedish criminal justice system works to ensure that forensic evidence can travel from crime scene to lab and from lab to court, and that it retains throughout the appropriate indexes despite traveling through such different orders, as Corinna Kruse (n.d.) traces. Most participants involved are very conscious that it is difficult to move objects labeled Evidence from one context to

another in a stable enough fashion that they function effectively as evidence, although not all of them attribute this difficulty to the difference in epistemic orders between lab and court.

Forensic technicians have to remove objects from crime scenes in such a way that they can be treated as evidence to be analyzed in a laboratory. Yet they then have to turn this evidence into descriptions in reports that they present in court—and do so in such a way that they are easily interpellated as expert witnesses. At every stage, those involved are quite conscious of the work that goes into keeping traces of crimes stable enough that they can function as evidence.

Circulation is often also anticipatory—people or objects can be valued for how they seem to mix social orders, allowing the person or object to travel in different directions. Yet how precisely this mixture should be embodied will change as the travel takes place. Tongan beauty pageant contestants, for example, are expected to perform certain mixtures of modern and traditional Tongan orders, mixtures that are valued differently as the women move from local contests to regional ones, according to Niko Besnier (2011). In local pageants, the competitors must walk a fine line between being modest and culturally knowledgeable, on the one hand, and seeming poised and fluent in Western status markers onstage on the other: “The contestants are required to be Tongans in and of the world, but still Tongans” (Besnier 2011, 130). Their performances must simultaneously

signal two social orders that Tongans experience as distinct, but they must be mixed in the right ways. Yet when the winner enters the regional contests, judges and audiences can no longer evaluate her cultural expertise effectively; they become far more concerned with “cosmopolitan svelteness” (15). In these moments, the women are judged by how they might succeed by the standards of the global stage, and they are required to embody a different combination of traditional and modern markers. The challenge of multiple social orders, in short, does not function as the same kind of challenge for every endeavor.

## [h1]Ritual

[ni]When scholars focus on social orders, ritual becomes relevant as an ethnographic site through which people on the ground create temporarily distinct social orders. A classic topic in anthropology looks different when ethnographers view rituals as “organized in their own right” (Handelman 2004, 4) and “microdomains of organization” (11). Rituals are analyzed as moments when participants join to create a temporally bounded order that is distinct from the surrounding social orders and that generates within itself a self-referential form of organization. The emphasis here is not on the implicit interconnections between ritual and other social orders or how a liminal social order contributes to a larger totality, as it is for Arnold Van Gennep (1960) or Victor Turner (1969). Instead, this analytic encourages

ethnographers to view rituals as moments when their fieldwork interlocutors are experimenting with creating sui generis social orders. Not all rituals are equally distinct from their surroundings; the more internally complex the ritual, the more it can be self-referentially distinct as a form of order (12).

Ritual, however, does not remain distinct—it is, after all, a bounded moment of separation, and participants will return to other social orders once the ritual has ended. All social orders are historically contingent, but ritual is experienced as particularly temporary. Sometimes, when a ritual ends, it has affected the surrounding social orders—its participants have changed status or shifted their reflexive perspective on how a particular social order is constituted. But the ritual need not always have this effect. A ritual will self-organize by

[ex]curving towards self-closure, to some degree of self-organization, however momentary, however transient, separating itself from the social field, existing in its own right, then ending, twisting back, torqueing into broader social fields, dissipating, its character influencing encounters to come. (Handelman 2004, 13)

Unlike those who use other anthropological approaches, scholars of multiple social orders view ritual not primarily as a symbolically charged space in which to reflect on larger social structures, but as a moment in which to play with boundary making and to form autopoietically organized

interactions. For example, in South Africa, Zulu men use the autopoietic qualities of ritual to carve out a powerful warrior masculinity during the *ngoma* dance ritual, in sharp contrast with the subdued masculinity of the miner or the black man walking down a city street (Meintjes 2017). Here, people use ritual to create social bonds and masculinities that travel only imperfectly and haltingly outside the moments of the dance. Through the dance, men form bonds with each other that make possible an alternative expression of gendered bodies, an expression of masculinity that is never openly discussed by Louisa Meintjes's interlocutors. What the body performs in this dance calls forth other futures from what these men experience in their daily lives. At the same time, the fact that the ritual comes to an end affirms the temporariness of the social order that the dance creates and brings into stark relief the challenge of bringing the possibility inherent in one's ritual masculinity into other contexts. Studying ritual thus reveals both the tactics and potential in fashioning separate social orders, and the dilemmas people face when hoping that some aspects of a recently created social order will travel.

## [h1]Scale

[ni]Studying ritual reveals how people on the ground produce social orders that can be temporary and separate, while focusing on scale reveals how people on the ground contrast and interweave social orders. Just as

boundaries and social orders are not a given, neither is scale. It is “the actor’s own achievement” (Latour 2007, 185), accomplished by referencing contrasting spatiotemporal orders. “Scaled hierarchies are the effects of efforts to sort, group, and categorize many things, people, and qualities in terms of relative degrees of elevation or centrality” (Carr and Lempert 2016, 3). People produce scale to showcase locatable and hierarchical relationships among people, objects, and social unities.

Social orders, however, shape the kinds of scale-making projects that people can attempt, and at times they will consciously turn to specific social orders for the scale making that they make possible. After all, not every social order permits expansive scale-making projects; some social orders support primarily local scale making, while others sustain interactions that can travel far and wide. Social orders make possible certain kinds of scale-making projects, and focusing on them quickly becomes a lens through which to view how power is expressed. Claims to universality are all too often one social order’s attempt at creating a far-reaching and infinitely reproducible scale-making project (Pigg 1992; Tsing 2005).

In the contemporary moment, these differences in scale-making projects can underlie how people experience inequalities. In a hospital in Papua New Guinea, the lack of resources means that doctors, nurses, and patients must work with many uncertainties, as Alice Street (2014) documents. A biomedical framework was but one of the ordering repertoires

that people were using to understand how to give and receive care. The boundaries between social orders are often especially uncertain, and in the hospital, people could not always establish clear boundaries between village forms and biomedical forms of ordering relations.

Yet clear and bounded social orders emerge between internationally trained medical researchers who use the Papua New Guinean hospital as a research site and hospital health workers, such as doctors, nurses, and lab technicians. Researchers had access to dramatically different resources from the hospital workers, such as international travel and well-functioning labs. This distinction does not easily lend itself to being labeled intercultural. Nevertheless, the differences were stark enough that “from the perspective of hospital workers, research and public health are two different ‘places’ in Madang Hospital, with different infrastructures and different spatiotemporal capacities built into them” (Street 2014, 219). For example, in practice, doctors in the Madang hospital saw their patients as ordered on a “single spectrum of sick” (111) instead of suffering from different types of diseases. As a result, doctors often treated patients with remedies they had available rather than with those based on a test-based diagnosis. This was in part because the hospital workers’ labs were in such demand and diagnostic equipment was so faulty that it was difficult to get a timely diagnosis.

The patients functioned differently for the researchers, who not only lacked relationships of care with these people but also had access to

infrastructures such as labs and scientific literature. These infrastructures brought the specimens that represented these patients into a more globally transportable classificatory schema. In essence, for hospital workers and patients, the hospital represented one kind of “truth-spot” (Gieryn 2018), a place that supports claims to a form of truth, but a truth-spot that was constructed differently for patients and their care-givers than for researchers. This difference hinges in part on the different access actors had to differently scaled infrastructures, some of which had more global reach than others.

## [h1]Power

[ni]If focusing on multiple social orders only allowed ethnographers to address circulation, ritual, and scale in new ways, this focus might not be so widespread. The analytical force lies in what ethnographers can learn about power by focusing on porous social orders and reflexivity. To address how people experience and enact power relationships in a given social order, scholars often focus on the contestation over which version of social order gets to dominate in a particular context. Not everyone in a given situation has equal authority or ability to determine the social order or classifications that will shape how relationships and interactions unfold in a particular situation. This is a well-documented dynamic in, for example, bureaucracies, border crossing, and resettlement camps.

Yet as ethnographers have noticed time and time again, disadvantaged people can refuse the social order imposed on them and insist on alternatives, even in interactions with representatives of the state. When Mohawk cross national borders, for example, they insist on their own definitions of indigeneity and sovereignty as members of an Iroquois Confederacy that preexisted both Canada and the United States as nations, as traced by Audra Simpson (2014). Most other accounts of border crossings describe moments when the crossers are forced to inhabit multiple identities as they encounter different classifications embedded in the social orders they move in and out of. Mohawk travelers have a different experience, because they are “reserve members or Iroquois before they cross, they are especially Iroquois as they cross, and they are Iroquois when they arrive at the place they want to be” (Simpson 2014, 116–17). Being Iroquois is a historically rich way of organizing political and family relationships in these moments, a way that for Mohawk travelers stays stable throughout. They repeatedly insist that they are members of a sovereign nation that is not recognized by the customs officials or even by all the states’ bureaucrats who decide whether they can cross national borders.

In these instances, the state defines what counts as a nation and as sovereignty, and how that shapes the ways that people can move. Mohawk understand the social order that is imposed on them; this is not a moment of miscommunication through misunderstanding. Mohawk travelers can and

do refuse the imposition, insisting on their historical connections to the Jay Treaty of 1794, which guarantees their rights as Iroquois to legitimize the social orders that they wish would dominate.

In other contexts, people cannot create the assemblages that typically produce desired forms of order because of historical changes to infrastructure or classificatory schemas. In the decades before Laura Bear's (2015) research on the effects of sovereign debt on a South Asian river port, ship pilots could coordinate the temporal demands of the river with the capitalist demands to produce profit, creating social hierarchies of skill and expertise that coordinated "divergent rhythms and temporal representations" (Bear 2015, 149) with relative success. In contrast, under austerity capitalism, it became increasingly impossible for people with different perspectives and forms of symbolic capital to coordinate enough so that they could move a ship from port to sea. In these and similar moments, power is experienced as unraveling or outright blocking others' attempts to create a temporary and efficacious social order. When these failures occur in contexts in which these assemblages had once been successful, people on the ground will often view these failures as evidence of historical change.

## [h1]Conclusion: New questions and new foci

[ni]When contemporary ethnographers assume that multiple social orders exist, they do not engage in a typological project whose goal is to describe

each distinct social order. Rather, ethnographers of porous social orders seek to understand how people on the ground deal with multiplicity, how they labor to ensure the coexistence of multiple social orders, and manage the boundaries between them, and how they foreground and background social orders at different moments and for different purposes.

In addition, ethnographers emphasize how people, objects, forms, and ideas circulate. By highlighting when permeable and contingent boundaries and circulation matter in social life, theorists avoid treating social orders as totalizing or object-like. This emphasis, however, opens the door to potential disagreement among scholars in this vein on how orderly these social orders truly are. The scholars I have cited analyze social orders as having varying degrees of institutional fixity, and thus their ethnographic encounters or theoretical inclinations might lead them to argue for differing intensities of patterned and interwoven repertoires.

Given these starting points, there are in any situation a number of ethnographic quandaries to figure out. In the most abstract terms, ethnographers explore what kinds of connections exist between these social orders and how boundaries between them are produced. This is often a question in which the historical background to a social order matters—is the relationship between social orders a product of colonialism, missionization, development projects, or the spread of democracy and lawcraft? If so, then ethnographers often start trying to understand the connections between the

preexisting and introduced social orders. This can lead to debates in which the underlying disagreement revolves around determining the type of relationship that underlies how social orders interact with each other. The debates can sometimes be framed as “Do people oscillate between social orders, or does the logic of one social order increasingly dominate, infiltrating other social orders?” Admittedly, I am far more interested in what gets revealed as people on the ground engage with and move among social orders—for example, how different social orders give rise to different timescapes or different scale-making projects, and how people are reflexively engaged with the consequences of these juxtapositions.

This conceptual lens encourages ethnographers to explore how different social orders intersect in a particular site, instead of focusing only on one site. If an ethnographer is studying religion in northern Nigeria, for example, the focus should be not only on the evangelical Christian churches and their congregants, but also on how the forms and practices of Nigerian evangelical Christianity dwell side by side with Muslim worship (Larkin 2014). If the focus is on exchange relationships, then one asks, How do objects and people circulate between different exchange systems, and what must one know and do to perform such crossings (e.g., Akin and Robbins 1999)? If one is studying legal pluralism: How do people engage with different legal systems, and how does the presence of alternative legal systems shape how courts act (Agrama 2012)? That is, ethnographers are

encouraged to focus on the interactions between social orders instead of delineating the workings of a single one.

In addition, when ethnographers explore how the boundaries between social orders are produced, they must turn to questions of power and morality: Who and what produces and maintains these distinctions? How do people decide which social order will dominate in a context, and how is that ensured? What is the right way to go about this? When scholars turn their attention to appropriately porous boundaries, what is appropriate for whom, and when? How do people, objects, forms, and ideas cross these social boundaries, and with what consequences? Is there conflict surrounding how boundaries are supposed to be maintained or to leak, and how does this conflict play out? Here, ethnographers need to tackle questions of translation, contact zones, and encounters—the moments when the crossing or clashing is enacted. They also have to deal with boundary objects (Star 2010) or strategically deployed shifters (Urciuoli 2003)—in what stays stable and what is transformed as people, objects, forms, and ideas circulate across these social orders.

By beginning with porous boundaries and multiple social orders, ethnographers address anew difference and reflexivity, organization and uncertainty, circulation and power. They explore how social orders and their boundaries require constant maintenance and repair so that circulation can take place in the ways people on the ground find most preferable. At the

same time, there is always an element of surprise. People do not always realize that a boundary is leaky in the right way, until suddenly their attempts at circulation fail and they learn that there has been a shift in how differences between social orders were being constituted. Or people discover that introducing a new social order alters in unpredictable ways how all the other more established social orders constitute themselves and their distinctions.

And yet . . . *porous boundaries* has been a handy phrase to capture distinctions between social orders, but it is not without its conceptual limitations. Would ethnographers start asking a slightly different set of questions if the metaphor weren't boundaries but rather ecotones—those borderlands in which two ecological zones coexist in the same place? Perhaps that substitution would lead to a greater focus on the differences that make a difference between social orders, for, as Don Brenneis (2017, 370) reminds readers,

[ex]Sometimes such ecotones are characterized by mixed assemblages—a bit of this, a bit of that—but they are also known among academic ecologists as zones in which more than the usual number of ideal types emerge; difference is most clearly marked not in the center but along the edges.

[ni]If ecotones were a starting point, then ethnographers might be more prone to see if the explicit contrasts between social orders lead people to draw more clearly and carefully delineated distinctions, while moving toward the implicit lets more of a mixture to suffuse through all interactions. Ecotones instead of boundaries might lead to more questions about contrasts than about circulation, just as social zones instead of social orders might encourage a focus on overlaps instead of sieving.

## [h1]Notes

*Acknowledgments.* This article has been discussed and circulated widely before publication, and it has been much improved as a result. I owe much to comments and readings by Mark Anderson, Debora Battaglia, Richard Bauman, Don Brenneis, Matei Candea, Melissa Demian, David Graeber, Sarah Green, Britt Halvorson, Elina Hartikainen, Laura Kunreuther, Brian Larkin, Susan Lepselter, Nidhi Mahajan, Yasmine Musharbash, Sarah Osterhoudt, Joel Robbins, Janet Roitman, Jen Roth-Gordon, Ryan Schram, Rupert Stasch, Marilyn Strathern, and Jerry Yee. I received helpful feedback from audiences at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the University of Helsinki, as well as from anonymous reviewers. In the final stages, when I needed help translating my intuitions into a clearer argument on the page, Niko Besnier and Jessica Greenberg offered invaluable advice,

and Pablo Morales made me less cryptic. All missteps and infelicitous phrasings are mine and mine alone.

## [h1]References

- Agrama, Hussein. 2012. *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Akin, David, and Joel Robbins, eds. 1999. *Money and Modernity: State and Local Currencies in Melanesia*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1986. "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value." In *The Social Order of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 3–63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Basso, Keith. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Bear, Laura. 2014. "Doubt, Conflict, Mediation: Anthropology of Modern Time." *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* 20, no. S1 (April): 3–30.
- Bear, Laura. 2015. *Navigating Austerity: Currents of Debt along a South Asian River*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bercovitch, Eytan. 1994. "The Agent in the Gift: Hidden Exchange in Inner New Guinea." *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 4 (November): 498–536.

- Besnier, Niko. 2011. *On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in a Pacific Island Nation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bessire, Lucas, and David Bond. 2014. "Ontological Anthropology and the Deferral of Critique." *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 3 (August): 440–56.
- Blommaert, Jan, and Ad Backus. 2013. "Superdiverse Repertoires and the Individual." In *Multilingualism and Modality: Current Challenges for Educational Studies*, edited by Ingrid de Saint-Georges and Jean-Jacques Weber, 11–32. Rotterdam: Sense.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1972. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bowman, Glenn. 1997. "Identifying versus Identifying with 'the Other': Reflections on the Siting of the Subject in Anthropological Discourse." In *After Writing Culture: Epistemology and Praxis in Contemporary Anthropology*, edited by Allison James, Jenny Hockey, and Andrew Dawson, 34–50. London: Routledge.
- Brada, Betsey. 2011. "'Not Here': Making the Spaces and Subjects of 'Global Health' in Botswana." *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 35, no. 2 (June): 285–312.
- Brenneis, Don. 2017. "Sand, Stability, and Stakeholders." In *Heritage Regimes and the State*, edited by Regina Bendix, Aditya Eggert, and

- Arnika Peselmann, 369–74. Göttingen, Germany: Göttingen University Press.
- Carr, Summerson, and Michael Lempert. 2016. "Introduction: Pragmatics of Scale." In *Scale: Discourse and Dimensions of Social Life*, edited by Summerson Carr and Michael Lempert, 1–21. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Demian, Melissa. 2017. "Making Women in the City: Notes from a Port Moresby Boarding House." *Signs* 42, no. 2 (Winter): 403–25.
- Douglas, Mary. 1986. *How Institutions Think*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Gal, Susan. 2015. "Politics of Translation." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44:225–40.
- Gershon, Ilana. 2006. "Reflexivity in Others' Contexts: An Introduction." *Ethnos* 71, no. 4 (December): 445–52.
- Gershon, Ilana. 2009. "Living Theory." *Critique of Anthropology* 29, no. 4 (December): 397–422.
- Gershon, Ilana. 2012. *No Family Is an Island: Cultural Expertise among Samoans in Diaspora*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Gieryn, Tom. 2018. *Truth-Spots: How Places Make People Believe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Govindrajan, Radhika. 2018. *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Green, Sarah. Forthcoming. "Geometries." In *Speaking Volumes: Sovereign Spaces, Material Boundaries, and the Territorial Imagination*, edited by Franck Billé and Jeffrey Twu. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Halvorson, Britt. 2018. *Conversionary Sites: Transforming Medical Aid and Global Christianity from Madagascar to Minnesota*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Handelman, Don. 2004. "Introduction: Why Ritual in Its Own Right? How So?" *Social Analysis* 48, no. 2 (Summer): 1–32.
- Hartikainen, Elina. 2018. "A Politics of Respect: Reconfiguring Democracy in Afro-Brazilian Religious Activism in Salvador, Brazil." *American Ethnologist* 45, no. 1 (February): 87–99.
- Hetherington, Kregg. 2011. *Guerrilla Auditors: The Politics of Transparency in Neoliberal Paraguay*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hull, Matthew. 2012. *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Irvine, Judith, and Susan Gal. 2000. "Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation." In *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*, edited by Paul V. Kroskrity, 35–84. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
- Killick, Evan. 2014. "Whose Truth Is It Anyway?" *Anthropology of This Century*, no. 9 (January). <http://aotcpres.com/articles/truth/>.

- Knorr-Cetina, Karin. 1999. *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kruse, Corinna. n.d. "Metaphors for Movement: Epistemic Infrastructures and the Movement of Knowledge Objects." Unpublished manuscript.
- Larkin, Brian. 2014. "Techniques of Inattention: Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria." *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (Fall): 989–1015.
- Latour, Bruno. 2007. *Reassembling the Social*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lowie, Robert. 1935. *The Crow Indians*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Luhmann, Nikolas. 1995. *Social Systems*. Translated by John Bednarz Jr. with Dirk Baecker. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Meintjes, Louisa. 2017. *Dust of the Zulu: Ngoma Aesthetics after Apartheid*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Merlan, Francesca. 2005. "Explorations towards Intercultural Accounts of Socio-cultural Reproduction and Change." *Oceania* 75, no. 3 (March–June): 167–82.
- Ong, Aihwa, and Stephen J. Collier. 2005. *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ortner, Sherry. 1984. "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 1 (January): 126–66.

- Pigg, Stacy. 1992. "Inventing Social Categories through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 3 (July): 491–513.
- Richland, Justin. 2013. "Jurisdiction: Grounding Law in Language." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42:209–26.
- Robbins, Joel. 2015. "Dumont's Hierarchical Dynamism: Christianity and Individualism Revisited." *Hau* 5, no. 1 (Spring): 173–95.
- Schram, Ryan. 2018. *Harvests, Feasts, and Graves: Postcultural Consciousness in Contemporary Papua New Guinea*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Silverstein, Michael. 2004. "Cultural Concepts and the Language-Culture Nexus." *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 5 (December): 621–52.
- Simpson, Audra. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sperber, Dan. 1985. *On Anthropological Knowledge: Three Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Star, Susan Leigh. 2010. "This Is Not a Boundary Object: Reflections on the Origins of a Concept." *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 35, no. 5 (September): 601–17.
- Star, Susan Leigh, and Martha Lampland, eds. 2009. *Standards and Their Stories: How Quantifying, Classifying, and Formalizing Practices Shape Everyday Life*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Stasch, Rupert. 2017. "Afterword: Village Space and the Experience of Difference and Hierarchy between Normative Orders." *Critique of Anthropology* 37, no. 4 (October): 440–56.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 2004. *Partial Connections*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 2018. "Opening Up Relations." In *A World of Many Worlds*, edited by Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena, 23–52. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Street, Alice. 2014. *Biomedicine in an Unstable Place: Infrastructure and Personhood in a Papua New Guinean Hospital*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Tsing, Anna. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tsing, Anna. 2013. "Sorting Out Commodities: How Capitalist Value Is Made through Gifts." *Hau* 3, no. 1 (Spring): 21–43.
- Turner, Victor. 1969. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*. London: Aldine Transaction.
- Urciuoli, Bonnie. 2003. "Excellence, Leadership, Skills, Diversity: Marketing Liberal Arts Education." *Language and Communication* 23, no. 3–4 (July–October.): 385–408.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. 1960. *The Rites of Passage*. Translated by Monika B. Vizedon and Gabrielle L. Caffee. New York: Psychology Press.

Vilaça, Aparecida. 2016. *Praying and Preying: Christianity in Indigenous Amazonia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Yngvesson, Barbara, and Susan Coutin. Forthcoming. *Documenting Impossible Realities: Ethnography, Memory, and the "As-If."* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ilana Gershon

Department of Anthropology

Indiana University

701 East Kirkwood Avenue

Bloomington, IN 47405

igershon@indiana.edu

---

<sup>1</sup> I was inspired to write this article after reading critiques of ontological perspectivism, or the ontological turn, that were phrased in similar ways. According to critics of this turn, people are surrounded by multiple social orders that they continually traverse. Lucas Bessire and David Bond find more compelling a world of “unstable and rotational temporalities, of epistemic and material ruptures, of categories and things unraveling and being reassembled” (Bessire and Bond 2014, 450). Also rejecting the ontological turn, Radhika Govindrajan (2018, 13) commits herself to a world that “is ‘composed’ at the juncture of multiple worlds that are constituted by the daily practices of a heterogeneous range of actors and that is

---

subject to the constraints of time and space.” After reading these evocative but brief descriptions, I realized that it would be useful to more systematically explore an approach that presumes multiple worlds.

<sup>2</sup> I am strongly influenced by Susan Leigh Star’s (2010) discussion of boundary objects, in which she describes them as sufficiently underdetermined to circulate with ease between different communities.

<sup>3</sup> There are so many ethnographers whose work I could mention here that I choose to focus predominantly on work by junior scholars and scholars working outside anthropological metropolises.

<sup>4</sup> Turning to spatiotemporal orders does not obviate an interest in difference and organization, and there are scholars who attend both to timescapes and epistemological difference (although often in separate publications).

<sup>5</sup> For people familiar with Melanesian notions of personhood and relationality, I am describing an analogous engagement with social orders. Just as in a moment of exchange, Melanesian social actors are choosing to foreground one relationship or one way of being related while letting others fade into the background (but not vanish entirely); so it is also with social orders. Actors will foreground some social orders while the traces of other social orders remain present but retreat into the surroundings.

<sup>6</sup> While ethnographers of multiple social orders know that those they write about are social analysts in their own right, it is also the case that social analysts *of* context tend to experience time and strategy differently from social analysts *in* context (Gershon 2009).